

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 LONDON 01662 01 OF 03 022013Z

44

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 IO-11

SAJ-01 EB-07 SIL-01 LAB-04 OMB-01 /084 W

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R 021759Z FEB 76

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8643

INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 01662

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PDEV, UK

SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: SOME CONSERVATIVE VIEWS

REF: LONDON 867

SUMMARY: CONSERVATIVE MP IAN SPROAT GAVE EMBASSY OFFICER SOME IMPRESSIMNS AND OPINIONS ON DEVOLUTION IN CONVERSA-TION JANUARY 09. SPROAT IS MINIMALIST WHO HAS EXPOUSED IDEA THAT SCOTTISH MPS ELECTED TO WESTMINSTER SHOULD SIT IN SESSION IN EDINBURGH PERIODICALLY TO CONSIDER WEST-MINSTER LEGISLATION AND ITS APPLICATION TO SCOTLAND. IN EFFECT, HE AGPEED THAT THIS WOULD AMOUNT TO HOLDING MEETINGS OF SAOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE IN EDINBURGH WITHOUT NEED FOR SEPARATE ELECTIONS OR NEW PURELY SCOTTISH AD-MINISTRATION. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS HE OFFERED PASSED DOUBT ON RELIABILITY OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND SUPPORTING SOME FORM OF DEVOLUTION AND MOTIVATIONS LABOR MP SILLARS HAD IN CREATING SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP).
END SUMMARY

1. SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVE MP IAN SPROAT, IN CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBASQY OFFICER JANUARY 29, SPOKE FREELY ABOUT THE
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 LONDON 01662 01 OF 03 022013Z

DISARRAY WITHIN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY OVER DEVOLUTION.

SPROAT IS PUBLICLY RECOGNIZED AS AN OPPONENT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S WHITE PAPER AND IS ON RECORD AGAINST ESTABLISHMENT OF A SEPARATE SCOTTISH ASSEMBLY, CREATION OF A NEW TIER OF GOVERNMENT FOR SCOTLAND, AND NEW ELECTION PROCEEDINGS.

2. SPROAT SAID THAT HIS INITIAL SPEECH ON DEVOLUTION, DELIVERED LAST JULY, HAD BEEN A SHOT IN THE DARK WITH RESPECT TO HIS LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE FEELINGS OF HIS CONSTITUENCY ON THIS QUESTION. HE EXPLAINED HIS JULY SPEECH AS PRIMARILY BASED ON HIS OWN VIEWS AND REFERRED TO THOSE VIEWS AS "TRADITIONAL TORY UNIONIST" IN CHARACTER.

3. SPROAT SAID THAT HIS CONSTITUENCY ASSOCIATION HAD SUBSEQUENTLY GIVEN HIS OPINION "100 PERCENT BACKING." WHILE HE WAS GRATIFIED AT THIS RESPONSE FROM HIS VOTERS IN ABERDEEN SMUTH, HE WAS NONETHELESS SURPRISED THAT THERE WERE FEW CONSERVATIVES IN HIS OWN CONSTITUENCY WITH DIFFERENT VIEWS.

4. DESCRIBING HIS CONSTITUENCY, SPROAT NOTED THAT HIS REAL OPPONENT AND CHALLENGE COMES FROM THE LABOR PARTY ORGANIZATION AND CANDIDATE, NOT FROM THE SNP, THOUGH THE SNP HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN NEIGHBORING CONSTITUENCIES. SPROAT SAID THAT ABERDEEN HAD TRADITIONALLY BEEN OPPOSED TO THE WIDER SEPARATIST THEMES WHICH THE SNP HAD EXPLOITED SUCCESSFULLY ELSEWHERE IN SCOTLAND. THE LEADING NEWSPAPER IN ABERDEEN WAS NOT PRO-SNP, AND HE CONTRASTED IT WITH THE SCOTSMAN IN EDINBURGH, CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL NEWSPAPER IN SCOTLAND WHICH, HE SAID, IS PRO-SNP BOTH IN ITS EDITORIAL POLICY AS WELL AS IN THE INCLINATIONS OF SOME OF ITS LEADING JOURNALISTS. (AS A FORMER FLEET-QUITTER HIMSELF, SPROAT PERHAPS HAS A FEEL FOR SUCH THINGS IN THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD.)

5. KNOWING THAT HIS CONSTITUENCY SUPPORTED HIS VIEWS, SPROAT SAID HE WAS NOT SURPRISED BY A RECENT COUNCIL ELECTION THERE WHEN A CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE DOUBLED HIS MAJORITY. THE CANDIDATE, TOO, IS AN OUTSPOKEN CRITIC OF DEVOLUTION. THE ELECTION, HOWEVER, DID HELP SPROAT, PAR-

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 LONDON 01662 01 OF 03 022013Z

TICULARLY WITH HIS PARLIAMENTARY COLLEAGUES, SOME OF WHOM EARLIER AOMMENDED HIS "FOOLHARDY COURAGE" IN EXPRESSING ANTI-DEVOLUTION VIEWS. NOW HIS COLLEAGUES, PARTICULARLY SOME REPRESENTING ENGLISH CONSTITUENCIES, COM-MENDED HIM FOR HIS PERCEPTION IN REFLECTING SENTIMENTS AGAINST DEVOLUTION MUCH MORE WIDELY HELD THAN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS WOULD INDICATE.

6. SPROAT HINTED THAT THE APPROBATION HE HAS BEEN RECEIVING INCLUDES, IN SOME PART AT LEAST, SOME SECOND THOUGHTS BY MRS. THATCHER HERSELF. WHILE SPROAT HAS NEVER BEEN PUBLICLY IDENTIFIED WITH A STRONGLY PRO-THATCHER GROUP, HE SENSES IN BOTH HER SPEECH ON DEVOLU-

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 LONDON 01662 02 OF 03 021902Z

44

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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SAJ-01 EB-07 SIL-01 LAB-04 OMB-01 /084 W

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R 021806Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 03 LONDON 01662

TION AND IN COMMENTS SHE HAS MADE TO HIM DIRECTLY, A LESS THAN WHOLEHEARTED APPROVAL OF DEVOLUTION PER SE. HE RECOGNIZES THAT, FOR THE MOMENT, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR HER TO ENDORSE AN ANTI-DEVOLUTION POSITION, BUT HE HAS, HE SAID, "STRONG REASON" TO BELIEVE THAT MRS. THATCHER IS LESS THAN SATISFIED WITH HER SHADOW CABINET SPOKESMAN ON SCOTTISH PROBLEMS (MP ALEX BUCHANAN-SMITH) AND SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED REPLACING HIM UNTIL HE CAME UNDER ATTACK DURING THE DEVOLUTION DEBATE.

7. SPROAT SAID THAT HE CONSIDERED BUCHANAN-SMITH A SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL CHOICE FROM THE BEGINNING FOR THE FRONT BENCH POSITION (HE WAS EQUALLY SURPRISED WITH HER INITIAL CHOICE FOR DEFENSE SPOKESMAN, ANOTHER SCOTTISH MP,

GEORGE YOUNGER). GEORGE YOUNGER AND BUCHANAN-SMITH, SPROAT SAID, WERE SONS OF CONSERVATIVE PEERS, QUITE SIMILAR IN PERSONALITY AND OUTLOOK, VERY PLEASANT, BUT NOT PARTICULARLY ORIGINAL THINKERS OR AGGRESSIVE PARTY MEMBERS. WITH HER DROPPING OF YOUNGER IN THE RECENT CABINET RESHUFFLE, SPROAT BELIEVES AT A SUITABLE TIME IN THE FUTURE SHE MAY DISPOSE OF BUCHANAN-SMITH. SPROAT
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 LONDON 01662 02 OF 03 021902Z

REGRETS THAT SOME OF HIS REMARKS QUOTED BY THE MEDIA WERE SO HIGHLY CRITICAL OF BUCHANAN-SMITH SINCE THIS MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THATCHER'S RETAINING HIM.

8. SPROAT APPEARS ALSO TO HAVE CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCOTTISH MPS FROM OTHER PARTIES. HE HAD A FEW PERCEPTIVE COMMENTS ON THE ABILITIES OF SNP MPS AND ON BREAK-AWAY LABOR MP JIM SILLARS. SILLARS, HE SAID, IS A HARD WORKER WITH A LOT OF ABILITY WHO SHOULD HAVE BEEN INCLUDED SOMEWHERE IN THE LABOR GOVERNMENT. HE ATTRIBUTED SILLARS' EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH A SEPARATE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY AS REPRESENTING SILLARS' DISILLUSION WITH THE INEPTNESS OF THE LABOR GOVERNMENT ON SCOTTISH PROBLEMS AND A HIGH DEGREE OF FRUSTRATION. SPROAT SAID THE REACTION OF THE LABOR ESTABLISHMENT WILL BE HIGHLY DETRIMENTAL TO SILLARS, AND HE FEELS THIS IS RIDICULOUS. THERE IS NO REASON, HE SAID, WHY THE LABOR PARTY CANNOT LIVE WITH A SEPARATE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY, JUST AS THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE HAD TO DEAL WITH A SEPARATE SCOTTISH TORY PARTY FOR A VERY LONG TIME. A "COSMETIC" ESTABLISHMENT OF TWO PARTIES WOULD SOLVE PROBLEMS FOR SILLARS WITHOUT CREATING DIFFICULTIES FOR THE LABOR PARTY AS A WHOLE. ONE REAL REASON WHY THE LABOR GOVERNMENT ITSELF HAS COME DOWN SO STRONGLY ON SILLARS IS THE FACT THAT SILLARS LACKS ANY SORT OF TRADE UNION SUPPORT (I.E., SCOTTISH TUC SUPPORT).

9. COMMENT: SPROAT IS A VERY BRIGHT CONSERVATIVE WITH A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF ABILITY. HE IS ACTIVE ON THE CONSERVATIVE BACKBENCH FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AND SPECIALIZES ON EASTERN EUROPE AND THE SOVIET UNION. HIS BUSINESS INTERESTS ARE IN PUBLISHING, AND HE HAS BUSINESS INTERESTS IN EASTERN EUROPE AS WELL AS IN THE UK, PARTICULARLY IN THE FIELD OF BOOK TRANSLATIONS.

10. SPROAT EVIDENTLY SEES HIMSELF AS HAVING LATCHED ON TO AN IDEA GIVING HIM GREATER PROMINENCE IN PARTY AFFAIRS. HIS SPEECHES AGAINST DEVOLUTION HAVE STRUCK MANY CHORDS OF SYMPATHY AND SUPPORT, THOUGH HE IS STILL BUCKING THE OFFICIAL PARTY LINE.

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PAGE 03 LONDON 01662 02 OF 03 021902Z

11. SPROAT IQ ALSO BUCKING THE HEATH LINE ON DEVOLUTION

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 LONDON 01662 03 OF 03 022017Z

44

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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R 021806Z FEB 76

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 03 LONDON 01662

AND CITED HEATH'S POLICY AS REFLECTED IN HIS SPEECH AS INDICATIVD OF HOW "OUT OF TUNE" HEATH IS NOW AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN WITH PUBLIC OPINION. HE MADE THIS STATEMENT WITH A COMPARISON OF HEATH'S BEING OUT OF TUNE EARLIER IN ADVANCING, AT A TIME WHEN POPULAR OPINION DID NOT SUPPORT HIM, THAT BRITAIN'S FUTURE LAY WITH EUROPE. SPROAT PRAISED HEATH'S EARLIER EFFORT AND CRITICIZED HIS LATTER ONE. HE ALSO SAID HE FOUND HEATH'S SPEECH NOT PARTICULARLY PEMARKABLE SINCE HE HAD BEEN GIVEN FORTY-TWO MINUTES RATHER THAN THE FIVE AVAILABLE TO OTHER CONSERVATIVES.

12. AS EMBASSY HAS REPORTED' ALL OPINION RESEARCH AND POLLING IN SCOTLAND HAS PRODUCED SUPPORT FOR VARYING LEVELS OF DEVOLUTION (INCLUDING SEPARATISM) WHICH ARE CONSIDERABLY AT VARIANCE WITH SPROAT'S IMPRESSIONS. IT IS, OF COURSE, CONCEIVABLE THAT HIS CONSTITUENCY IS NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REST OF SCOTLAND. HIS REFERENCES TO THE POLITIAAL SYMPATHIES OF THE ABERDEEN PAPER WOULD TEND TO CONFIRM THIS AS WELL AS HIS REMARKS ON THE SCOTSMAN. IN THE EMBASSY'S VIEW, THE SCOTSMAN IS CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 LONDON 01662 03 OF 03 022017Z

"NATIONALIST" IN SYMPATHY BUT NOT PRO-SNP AS SPROAT SUGGESTED.

13. THE EMBASSY HAS ALSO REPORTED ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY AND OF SILLARS' ROLE (REF LONDON 452). WHILE SPROAT'S VIEWS ON SILLARS ARE INTERESTING, WE BELIEVE THAT SILLARS' PRIMARY MOTIVATIONS WERE DISGUST WITH THE "NON-SOCIALIST" CHARACTER OF LABOR GOVERNMENT POLICIES (AS DISTINCT FROM ITS INEPTNESS) AND THE DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER ITSELF. SIMILARLY, SPROAT'S REMAPKS ON SILLARS' LACK OF TRADE UNION SUPPORT DO NOT AGREE WITH THE FACTS; SEVERAL BRANCH UNIONS IN SCOTLAND HAVE OPENLY SUPPORTED HIM, AFFILIATED WITH THE SLP, AND DONATED FUNDS, THOUGH THE SCOTTISH TUC REMAINS FIRMLY ALLIED WITH THE LABOR PARTY.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PARTY LINE, REORGANIZATIONS, PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC OPINION POLLS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 02 FEB 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: ElyME
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976LONDON01662
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760039-0254
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760292/aaaadcua.tel
Line Count: 309
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 76 LONDON 867
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: ElyME
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 12 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <12 MAY 2004 by ellisoob>; APPROVED <07 SEP 2004 by ElyME>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: DEVOLUTION: SOME CONSERVATIVE VIEWS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PDEV, UK, (SPROAT, IAN)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006